Levin Notes

The history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people,

supposedly for their own good. Each level in the hierarchy of education

believes it knows best what those at lower levels need to do, and has

little shyness about telling them or, just as often, forcing them. So governments

issue directives to school districts, schools, principals and teachers;

districts instruct schools, and principals try to direct teachers.

Right at the bottom of the education status list, of course, are students.

They are subject to direction from everyone above. Even though all the

participants in education will say that schools exist for students, students

are still treated almost entirely as the objects of reform.

The pragmatic arguments for greater student participation in education

reform are varied and overlapping, but the arguments can be thought of

as embodying one or more of five lines:

1. Effective implementation of change requires participation by and buyin

from all those involved, students no less than teachers;

2. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make

reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation;

3. Students’ views can help mobilise staff and parent opinion in favour

of meaningful reform;

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4. Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards

reforms, requires a more active student role in schooling;

5. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is

fundamental to all improvement.

The idea that participation is a requisite for commitment to change and

hence for successful change is now generally regarded as a received truth.

Almost every prominent writer on the subject assumes that teacher involvement

and support is key to any lasting change in schools

Smylie and Hart (1999) discuss the importance

of building strong social relations among teachers.

Even models that are based extensively on the collection of data

to guide improvement tend to treat students as passive providers of information

rather than active co-constructors of meaning (e.g. Joyce, Calhoun

& Hopkins, 1999). As Fullan (1991, p. 182) puts it, “. . . we hardly know

anything about what students think about educational change because no

one ever asks them.”

Corbett and Wilson (1995) argue that student resistance to change

can also be a lever for educator learning

As Erickson

and Schultz (1992, p. 482) put it, “The absence of student experience from

current educational discourse limits the insight of educators as well as that

of students”.

Constructivist learning requires a more active student role in schooling

Much of the recent effort in education reform is organised around

constructivist ideas about learning (Prawat & Peterson, 1999). The broad

recognition of this position is illustrated in the report of OECD Education

ministers in 1996 (OECD, 1996), which described “successful learning

and work environments” as being meaningful and motivating for learners;

taking into account what learners bring; interweaving knowledge, problem

solving and application; fostering active learner involvement, and allowing

learners to control their own performance. While constructivism is a broad

term that can include a wide range of educational practices, a common

thread is the view that schooling must be organised around the reality

that students are active constructors of knowledge rather than its passive

recipients (APA & McREL, 1993). All versions of constructivism call for

students to be engaged more actively in learning.

By definition an active

student is seeking to manage his or her own learning. The result will necessarily

be more questions and opinions by students about the organization

of learning. Students will want to have something to say about how they

learn, when they learn, where they learn, and so on.Many matters that have

traditionally been assumed to be the purview of the teachers will become

instead matters to be discussed and negotiated with students – not just

because such involvement creates buy-in as in the arguments a few pages

earlier, but because this kind of discussion is critical to learning.

in “Education as Adventure:

Lessons from the Second Grade” (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993). The

class described in this book, a group of second graders with many facing

challenges of poverty, is so vital, and open to student ideas, and so dominated

by the importance of real learning, that one cannot but be enthused

by what is possible.

As Newmann (1992) points out, to enhance achievement one

must first learn how to engage students

speak with considerable confidence about the features of learning that

promote motivation – meaningful tasks, a reasonable degree of autonomy

in how these are carried out, and a setting that provides respect, support

and challenge simultaneously. Kershner (1996) interviewed year 9 (13–14

Teachers are not the producers of

learning; in the end it is students who must do the learning. Students are

not raw materials to be shaped, as suggested in so many of the production

metaphors for schooling, but inevitably the shapers, for better or worse,

of themselves.

Studies of hundreds of U S secondary schools (Wilson & Corcoran,

1988) and two large studies of Canadian secondary schools nominated as

‘exemplary’ or as especially engaging to students (CEA, 1995; Smith et al.,

1998) show that traditional patterns of order and hierarchy are overwhelmingly

dominant. Many other qualitative or ethnographic studies of schools

have had similar findings (e.g. Fullan, 1991; Rudduck et al., 1996). John

Goodlad’s huge study of U.S. schools in the early 1980s came to these

conclusions about secondary schools.

The picture that emerges from the data is one of students increasingly conforming, not

assuming an increasingly independent decision-making role in their own education.

On one hand, many teachers verbalise the importance of students increasingly becoming

independent learners; on the other, most view themselves as needing to be in control of the

decision-making process. (1984, p. 109)

Students in the classes we observed made scarcely any decisions about their learning

. . . (1984, p. 229)

since in almost all the current rhetoric students are, if mentioned at all,

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discussed as objects to be worked upon rather than actors to be taken

seriously. Ryan and Stiller (1991, p. 117) point out that “. . . the more we

A considerable body of evidence shows that disadvantaged

students tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction,

and are given the least opportunity to participate actively in their

own education (Anderson & Pelliger, 1990; Brown, 1991; Knapp, Shields

& Turnbull, 1995).

Learners with poor success records are often most motivated by forms of

education that give them more control over what they do and how they

do it (Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1995). This is one of the main appeals of

computer-assisted instruction (Levin, 1997b); as students realise that they

can determine what and how they learn, their level of commitment to and

success in learning tends to rise significantly.

Nolen (1995) point out that teachers do know what motivates students,

but do not use these practices all the time because of perceived external

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constraints. Lewis (1999) finds that teachers identify a gap between what

they think is best practice and what they think is realistic in the classroom.

Being the only student

among many adults is also a difficult situation for many young people.

Schools ought to consider three further steps: involving several students

in formal management processes, providing training and support for

students, and asking students to organise their own parallel process of

discussion of change that could bring many more students into the deliberative

process

students will

need help in learning to participate effectively in deliberative processes in

the schools. Since the skills required to participate in managing reform,

such as defining problems, gathering evidence, analysing data, writing

proposals, and working effectively in teams, are themselves important

educational outcomes, helping students learn them is clearly a worthwhile

educational activity that the school should support.

None of these strategies is limited to high school students. As the

examples cited earlier suggest, even young students have ideas about what

makes schooling satisfying, and the further development of their skills in

these areas is itself a valuable educational task.

What ideas do they have for making schools

more educational? Listening with real attention, asking questions, and

asking students to develop their ideas is a way of contributing to the

discussion around reform that can be done by any teacher or administrator.

Schooling can itself become a part of the curriculum. Students can

gather data, conduct surveys, debate options, consider alternatives. The

data-based approach to school improvement advocated by Joyce, Calhoun

and Hopkins (1999) itself provides a large number of possibilities for

students to be engaged in school reform. Work by Rudduck et al. (1996),

Nicholls and Hazzard (1993), and Nicholls and Thorkildsen (1995) all

provide further stimulating examples. Most importantly, all these activities

require key educational skills – reading, writing, analysing data,

discussing, thinking.

Students’ wishes today are modest, even

timid. They do not seek to overthrow the system, or even to control it.

They expect and want educators to remain in control. They do, however,

want to understand why things are done as they are. They would like to

be able to voice their views about change and have them heard. They wish

to have some more choice about how and what they learn. On the whole,

they are amazingly accepting of the standard organisation and practices of

schools.

Look Up

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